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Reagan Spoke of Iran Ties in Early '86

President Reagan has finally released us from our pledge to keep secret what he told us more than a year ago about the Iran arms sale. We can now disclose the only known taped comments of the president on the matter before he came under fire eight months later.

Reagan's observations in February 1986 confirm his claim that he was pursuing a strategic opening aimed at potential successors to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as much as he was working for release of American hostages.

We first learned about the arms-for-hostages deal in early December 1985—several months before money was diverted to the Nicaraguan contras. Because printing the story would endanger the hostages' lives, we sat on it.

But we wondered whether the president knew about the arms deal, or whether it was a rogue operation by middle-level officials. So Dale Van Atta asked for an interview with Reagan, and was ushered into the Oval Office on Feb. 24, 1986.

The president had been told that we were holding off on the story and that we wanted to know whether he was aware of the arms deal. At the last minute, White House spokesman Larry Speakes sat in on the interview. Since Speakes didn't know what we knew about the secret arms deal, Van Atta—and the president—did not refer explicitly to weapons during the interview. But Reagan still confirmed our story circumspectly.

Here's the interchange:

Van Atta: "This is on Iran. For six years now, they've been waging a terrorist war against us and there are at least 264 American bodies that they

can count as being responsible for, including, as we reported, [CIA official] William Buckley last year, whom they tortured mercilessly. (The president nodded his head, 'Yes,' to confirm both the 264 figure and Buckley's torture-induced death.)

"I know there are still four hostages there now and that may preclude you from saying anything. If that does, and I were to agree not to run any statement that you would make until after the hostages were home safely, what I would like is just your gut feeling on what . . . we should do about Iran

REAGAN: I can understand their families' impatience and thinking nothing is going on because they don't see it out in front"

VAN ATTA: "No, I'm aware you're doing a lot on it"

REAGAN: "And investigating every possible opportunity to get them back The Iranian situation—we have to remember that we had a pretty solid relationship with Iran during the term of the shah [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi]. We have to realize also that that was a very key ally in that particular area in preventing the Soviets from reaching their age-old goal of the warm-water ports With the takeover by the present ruler [Khomeini], we have to believe that there must be elements present in Iran that, when nature takes its eventual course [the ailing Khomeini dies], may want to return to a different relationship.

"So . . . while we have to oppose what they're doing and what's going on—we, at the same time, must recognize we do not want to make enemies of those who today . . . could be friends."